

Merritt Parkway, Main Avenue/Route 7 Bridge
Spanning Main Avenue/Route 7 at the 17.7 mile mark
on the Merritt Parkway
Norwalk
Fairfield County
Connecticut

HAER No. CT-93

HAER
CONN,
1-NOWA,
7-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

Merritt Parkway, Main Avenue/Route 7

Bridge
HAER No. CT-93

Location: Spanning Main Avenue/Route 7 at the 17.7 mile mark on the Merritt Parkway in Norwalk, Fairfield County, Connecticut at exits 39 and 40

UTM: 18.632090.4555565
Quad: Norwalk North, Connecticut

Construction Date: 1937

Engineer: Connecticut Highway Department

Architect: George L. Dunkelberger, of the Connecticut Highway Department, acted as head architect for all Merritt Parkway bridges.

Contractor: C. W. Blakeslee Construction Company
Branford, Connecticut

Present Owner: Connecticut Department of Transportation
Wethersfield, Connecticut

Present Use: Used by traffic on the Merritt Parkway to cross Main Avenue/Route 7

Significance: The bridges of the Merritt Parkway were predominately inspired by the Art Deco and Art Moderne architectural styles of the 1930s. Experimental forming techniques were employed to create the ornamental characteristics of the bridges. This, combined with the philosophy of incorporating architecture into bridge design and the individuality of each structure, makes them distinctive.

Historians: Todd Thibodeau, HABS/HAER Historian
Corinne Smith, HAER Engineer
August 1992

For more detailed information on the Merritt Parkway, refer to the Merritt Parkway History Report, HAER No. CT-63.

LOCAL HISTORY

In 1640, Roger Ludlow acquired land along the east side of the Norwalk River from the Long Island Sound to twelve miles inland. A couple of months later Daniel Patrick, a friend of Ludlow, purchased a similar amount of acreage on the west side of the river. These two acquisitions encompassed all of present-day Norwalk.¹

Ten years passed between these purchases and settlement of the region. In 1650, Ludlow sold his land to residents of the Hartford Colony. That same year, these new owners moved to what is now East Norwalk, under the leadership of two surveyors, Richard Olmstead and Richard Webb. In 1651, Norwalk formed a town. The community gradually expanded as an agricultural and shipping center. At one point Norwalk included parts of Wilton, New Canaan, and Westport. By the beginning of the American Revolution, Norwalk included the districts of Norwalk, South Norwalk, East Norwalk, West Norwalk, Broad River, Silvermine, Winnipauk, and Cranbury.²

In summer 1779, the British burned more than 300 structures in the town. The community took several years to rebound from this loss, but by the early 1800s, Norwalk was again an expanding agricultural and shipping community. Larger scale industrial development commenced in 1848, when the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad reached the Norwalk River. Norwalk became a hat-making center. The Volk Hat Company employed more than 500 workers. Other substantial enterprises developed, including the Norwalk Lock Company, Norwalk Iron Works, and Roth and Goldschmidt

¹-----, This Is Norwalk (Norwalk: League of Women Voters, 1963), 5.

²Samuel Richard Weed, Norwalk After Two Hundred and Fifty Years (South Norwalk: C. A. Freeman Publishers, 1901), 18-19.

Corset Company. Fueling this development was the arrival of large numbers of Irish and German immigrants.³

Following World War I, Norwalk experienced another population boom, as many New Yorkers who had vacationed in Norwalk for years settled permanently and began to commute. These new arrivals eagerly awaited completion of the Merritt Parkway. After it was finished, the parkway helped to accelerate the residential development of the western sections of the community, especially Winnipauk and Cranbury. During World War II watchtowers were established on the Merritt to spot airplanes and relay the information to Mitchell Field on Long Island.⁴

BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION HISTORY

Main Avenue/Route 7 is a major transportation artery, originating at Route 1 in Norwalk, it goes as far north as the Canadian border. The first section of the parkway opened on June 29, 1938 and went from the New York state line in Greenwich to New Canaan Road/Route 123 in Norwalk. Three days later the road was extended two miles to Main Avenue/Route 7.⁵

The Daniel Deering Construction Company of Norwalk, Connecticut, received the contract to grade the Merritt Parkway from New Canaan Road/Route 123 to West Rocks Road, in Norwalk

³This Is Norwalk, 5-6.

⁴Deborah Wing Ray and Gloria P. Stewart, Norwalk Being an Historical Account of That Connecticut Town, (Canaan, NH: Phoenix Publishing, 1979), 194, 200.

This Is Norwalk, 6.

"3000 Attend Merritt Parkway Opening; Hear Cross Voice Hope For Extension," Norwalk Hour, 30 June 1938, p. 1.

⁵"Governor to Open Parkway on June 29," Greenwich Press, 23 June 1938, p. 1.

"State Highway Department to Open Parkway to Main Avenue For Holiday," Norwalk Hour, 24 June 1938, p. 1, col. 2.

(ConnDot project #180-51). While the Main Avenue/Route 7 Bridge is within this section of the Merritt, the grade separation and bridge contract went to the C. W. Blakeslee Construction Company of Branford, Connecticut (ConnDot project #180-65).⁶ The bridge cost \$70,259 and was completed in 1937. The paving work for this region of the Merritt extended from Comstock Hill Road, in Norwalk to West Rocks Road. This contract was awarded to the New Haven Construction Company of New Haven, Connecticut (ConnDot project# 180-95). The Main Avenue/Route 7 Bridge has received little maintenance since it was built. In 1985, the north bound acceleration ramp was widened and extended.⁷

BRIDGE DESCRIPTION

The Main Avenue/Route 7 Bridge is a single-span bridge composed of two 36'-8"-wide reinforced-concrete rigid frames divided by a 16'-6"-wide open median area. The median area is bounded by the railings of the frames on two sides and reinforced-concrete walls on two sides. The bridge spans 54' at a skew angle of 11°-8' and a grade of 0.745 percent. Curved on a 130' radius away from the parkway, 35'-long reinforced-concrete wing walls form the approach for the overpass by the Merritt Parkway.

The two frames are identical but built independently of each other with a 1/2"-wide, cork-filled expansion joint at the foundation to separate the frames from the median area. The rigid-frame design allows the engineer to decrease the structural material at the center of the span, thus forming an arched opening. (See the Merritt Parkway History Report, HAER No. CT-63, for a more detailed description

⁶Contract Card File, Map File and Engineering Records Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation, Wethersfield, CT.

⁷Main Street/Route 7 Bridge, DOT #530; Bridge Maintenance File, Engineering Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation, Newington, CT.

of the rigid-frame.) The intrados of the span rises 3'-7" from the springline to the crown, while the extrados remains horizontal from knee to knee. The frame thickness at the crown is 18". The outside of the knee is chamfered, and the inside of the knee is a corner with an obtuse angle. The frame leg thickness increases slightly from 4'-9" at the base to 5'-3" at the knee. The exposed face of the legs remains vertical, and the hidden face slopes away from the roadway. The bridge is supported on reinforced-concrete footings. The footings on the west side of the bridge bear on cyclopean concrete placed at a depth averaging 12'.

With the exception of the voussoirs, the Main Avenue Bridge is faced with stone that is laid up against the concrete instead of being set into the formwork before the concrete is poured. The voussoirs are cut approximately the same size from gray stone and anchored to the concrete slab and curb. The wing walls are offset outward from the face of the spandrel and the edge at the frame is battered. This battered edge and the corner of the frame leg are faced with gray quoins that alternate in depth. The rest of the exterior of the bridge and the walls at the median are covered with random rubble masonry with a light brown tint. The underside of the frames are not surfaced with stone, and the faces of the frame legs contain two arched panels with a tooled finish.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ray, Deborah Wing, and Gloria P. Stewart. Norwalk Being an Historical Account of That Connecticut Town. Canaan, NH: Phoenix Publishing, 1979.

Weed, Samuel Richard. Norwalk After Two Hundred and Fifty Years. An Account of the Celebration of the 250th Anniversary of the Charter of the Town. South Norwalk: C. A. Freeman Publishers, 1901.

-----, This Is Norwalk. Norwalk: League of Women Voters, 1963.

Norwalk Hour. 1937-38.

- Contract Card File. Map File and Engineering Records Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation: Wethersfield, CT. This includes construction drawings, copies of which are in the HAER field records.
- Bridge Maintenance File. Engineering Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation: Newington, CT.

PROJECT INFORMATION

This recording project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey and the Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division of the National Park Service, Robert J. Kapsch, Chief. The Merritt Parkway recording project was sponsored and funded by the Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDot) and the Federal Highway Administration.

The fieldwork, measured drawings, historical reports and photographs were prepared under the general direction of Eric N. DeLony, HAER Chief, and Sara Amy Leach, HABS Historian.

The recording team consisted of Jacqueline A. Salame (Columbia University), architect and field supervisor; Mary Elizabeth Clark (Pratt Institute) and B. Devon Perkins (Yale University), architectural technicians; Joanne McAllister-Hewlings (US/ICOMOS-Great Britain, University of Sheffield), landscape architect; Corinne Smith (Cornell University), engineer; Gabrielle M. Esperdy (City University of New York) and Todd Thibodeau (Arizona State University), historians; and Jet Lowe, HAER photographer.